

Introduction to Erewhon

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Surtout point de zèle. Butler's favourite maxim is not perhaps the last word in human wisdom and human virtue; the last word insists on the imperative duty of zeal in certain circumstances. But, if not the last, it is unquestionably the last word but one. A world which consistently lived up to this motto would certainly be without some of the finest and most extraordinary flowers of human endeavour; but it would also be relieved of innumerable miseries and wickednesses. Men show at least as much zeal in mischief as in well doing, in folly as in wisdom. The surest way to work up a crusade in favour of some good cause is to promise people that they will have a chance of maltreating someone. Men must be bribed to build up and do good by the offer of an opportunity to hurt and pull down. To be able to destroy with a good conscience, to be able to behave badly and call your bad behaviour 'righteous indignation' – this is the height of psychological luxury, the most delicious of moral treats. In any cause, the best or the most atrocious, zeal is always intoxicating. A world without zeal would be a world deprived of many simple but savage pleasures: but at least half its present excuses for interfering and bullying would have been taken away from it.

English literature is a literature of zeal – zeal for righteousness; zeal for mysticism; zeal for romantic love; zeal for a no less romantic pessimism and misanthropy. Like Zimri in *Absalom and Achitophel*, our literature is never moderate:

Railing and praising were his usual themes,
And both (to show his judgment) in extremes;
So over violent, or over civil,
That every man, with him, was God or Devil.

Excess in some form or another is probably inseparable from the highest human achievements. But this fact takes away nothing from the value of the Golden Mean. The highest achievements are beyond the powers of all but a tiny minority of men and women; it follows therefore that, for the great mass of humanity, excess has no excuse. Moderation and common sense are humble, homely virtues; but they are the highest to which most of us can aspire. And

yet, in spite of this, how few, in all the history of English literature, have been the apostles of a simple and unzealous decency! Zealots there are in crowds; but the masters of moderation are few and far between. Of these few the first and greatest is Chaucer. By an unfortunate historical accident, he lived at a time when modern English was still in formation. The language in which he wrote became, within a hundred and fifty years of his death, almost a foreign language. This is why his influence on subsequent generations of English-speaking people has been so small – much smaller than his own merits deserved or than, for our sake, it should have been. Born two hundred years later, he might have been for the English almost what Montaigne has been for the French. As it is, he is hardly more than a literary curiosity.

‘Let Austin have his swink to him reservèd:’
‘Yet am I but an horse, and horse’s law
I must obey, and with my fellows draw.’

These and a thousand other treasures of humane, unzealous wisdom have remained for four hundred years almost undiscoverably buried in the depths of Chaucer’s Middle English. Philology has deprived us of what should have been one of the great formative elements of a thoroughly humanistic culture.

As a critic of life, if not as a poet, Butler was of the true Chaucerian lineage – a solitary voice crying – or rather gently and ironically murmuring – in the wilderness of Victorian zeal. Surrounded by Mrs. Nosnibors, who were perpetually lamenting ‘that it was indeed melancholy to see what little heed people paid to the most precious of institutions’ (the Musical Bank), Butler would make no reply; but privately he was of opinion – and it would certainly have been Chaucer’s opinion too – ‘that the greater part of mankind do approximately know where they get that which does them good.’ We can catch another glimpse of him arguing about the problem of personal immortality with one of those zealous nineteenth-century non-conformists who contrived to make life so very unpleasant for all around them. In the person of Higgs, the non-conformist dogmatically asserts that ‘there are several well authenticated cases of people having died and come to life again.’ “If this be so,” answers Butler, the Erewhonian, “if this be so, we must bear it as best we may.” We are reminded of the old poet’s advice:

That thee is sent receive in buxomness;
The wrestling of this world asketh a fall.

And how Chaucerian again is Butler's conclusion that, for the common man, the love of God is 'to have good health, good looks, good sense, experience, a kindly nature and a fair balance of cash in hand'! His sense of the importance of cash in hand was always acute. 'Purse is the archdeacon's hell,' Chaucer had affirmed, and that a favourable balance is the 'queen of comfort and good company.' Butler entirely concurred in this sensible opinion of what the zealots call 'filthy lucre.' In the twenty-fifth chapter of *Erewhon* occurs a notable paragraph in which he sets forth the metaphysical advantages of wealth. "Those mighty organisms, our leading bankers and merchants, speak to their congeners through the length and breadth of the land in a second of time; their rich and subtle souls can defy all material impediment, whereas the souls of the poor are clogged and hampered by matter, which sticks fast about them as treacle to the wings of a fly, or as one struggling in a quicksand.... Who shall deny that one who can tack on a special train to his identity, and go wheresoever he will whensoever he pleases, is more highly organized than he who, should he wish for the same power, might wish for the wings of a bird with an equal chance of getting them; and whose legs are his only means of locomotion. That old philosophic enemy, matter, the inherently and essentially evil, still hangs about the neck of the poor and strangles him; but to the rich, matter is immaterial; the elaborate organization of his extra-corporeal system has freed his soul." As a corrective and complement to the Franciscan zeal for poverty, this could not be bettered.

Erewhon is a book of criticism – criticism by means of direct comparison. "Look here upon this picture, and on this," is what in effect Butler says to his readers. Against the image of the actual world which necessarily exists in every mind, he sets the image of another world and leaves us to note the differences between them and to draw the conclusions which the artfulness of his presentation has rendered inevitable.

The general tendency of all the criticisms in *Erewhon* is the same; they are all directed against that excessive zeal which has always tended to make life in our countries so unnecessarily painful and disagreeable. Thus, the Erewhonians regarded crime as a disease and disease as a crime. Now, it is obviously impossible to work up much righteous zeal against the sick. We can feel annoyance with those who irritate or damage us without meaning to; but this annoyance cannot take on the quality of a virtuous act unless we have the conviction that our enemies are responsible for their misbehaviour towards us. We prefer to consider them responsible, because then we can punish them. An immense amount of

zeal has always gone into punishing criminals and an immense amount of ingenuity into the invention of crimes, so that there may be criminals for respectable people to vent their zeal on. The Erewhonian philosophy robs mankind of one of its most ancient excuses for cruelty. If criminals are merely sick, then our sadism towards them remains unmitigated sadism and cannot disguise itself as a zeal for righteousness.

Butler himself believed that his insistence on the analogy between sin and sickness was one of his most important contributions to thought. Subsequent history has brought pragmatic proof that he was right. What was a heresy in 1872 is now no longer heretical. Indeed, it has become so nearly orthodox that even jurisprudence (whose business it is to be conservative) is now beginning to take cognizance of it. Crime in Erewhon is a disease; but conversely disease and, in general, all physiological imperfections are crimes.

The main thesis of a book like Lawrence's *The Man Who Died* – to wit, that it is wrong to sacrifice the body to the spirit and happiness to a principle of abstract virtue – is now taken (almost too unquestioningly, perhaps) for granted. That Jesus, rescued from death, should repent of his former asceticism seems to us normal and natural. How would Lawrence's book have been received in the eighteen-seventies? One shudders to think. For the great gulf which separates our view-point from the view-point of the people who read, or who might have read, the first edition of *Erewhon*, the Erewhonian philosophy is largely responsible. Though we may not be aware of it, Butler lives on in the minds of all of us, surviving there with the only kind of posthumous life in which he himself believed. "Our will-power," he wrote, "is not wholly limited to the working of its own special system of organs, but under special circumstances can work and be worked upon by other will-powers like itself... In many cases the sum total of a man's vicarious action and of its outcome exceeds to an almost infinite extent the sum total of those actions and works that were effected through the mechanism of his own physical organs. In these cases his vicarious life is more truly his life than any that he lived in his own person." Judged by his own standards of immortality, Butler is at present one of the most lively of the dead. He lives whenever men think about crime and whenever they consider the problem of happiness. There is another field of contemporary thought in which this posthumous life is no less intense. Whenever men think about the purpose and the human significance of machines, Butler is inevitably present in the background of their minds, if not in their consciousness. The men of the nineteenth century were inordinately pleased with themselves for their

inventions; and so great was their zeal for ‘progress’ that they were ready to make almost any sacrifice to achieve it. Ideally, mechanism is made for man. But we and our fathers have been behaving as though man were made for mechanism. Moreover, mechanism, as Butler was the first to point out, has an evolutionary life of its own and develops according to the laws of its own mechanical being – laws which are quite different from the laws of *our* being. The environment in which any idea develops is the human intelligence. But just as plants grow for their own sake and not for the benefit of the beds in which they happen to be rooted, so ideas, such as mechanical inventions, may flourish in human minds, but not for the good of those minds – even, ultimately, at their expense. The results of this independent development of mechanism and of our misplaced zeal for ‘progress’ are disastrously visible throughout the contemporary world. Butler’s Erewhonians foresaw the dangers into which they were running. Fearful of becoming the slaves and parasites of their own inventions, they destroyed all machinery more elaborate than that which was necessary to support a late-mediaeval mode of life. Once more the fantastic heresy of the eighteen-seventies has become the commonplace of the nineteen-thirties. The old enthusiasm for indefinite mechanical progress has considerably abated. Modern Europe and America are not nearly so far away from Erewhon as they seemed sixty years ago.

Erewhon is a work entirely of the critical intelligence; it amuses and stimulates and instructs, but it does not stir our emotions. *Erewhon Revisited* was written thirty years after *Erewhon*. It contains the final and maturest statement of Butler’s doctrine of vicarious life after death and some excellent comments on the historical basis of organized religion. But as a criticism of the real world it is less variously pungent than its predecessor. However, the book makes up for this defect by a quality in which *Erewhon* was wholly lacking. *Erewhon Revisited* is a work of sentiment as well as of criticism. Butler’s account of Yram and her son is genuinely moving. The physical beauty of youth and the moral beauty of the simple virtues and natural pieties are rendered with a deep feeling which communicates itself to the reader. All his life Butler had been protesting against too much zeal, against unnaturalness and excess. But it was only at the very end that he allowed himself to express (and with what admirably simple effectiveness!) his sense of the intrinsic goodness and beauty of that naturalness he had always advocated. The sense and honesty of Chaucer – these he had always displayed. In this last book he reveals something of the delicate sensibility and emotional depth of his greater predecessor. The critical philosopher had within him at least the rudiments of a poet.